
Counseling Women in Behavioral Self-Direction

by Helen Brandhorst Krumboltz and Johanna Shapiro

After consciousness raising, what? Women who want to alter their socialized responses may learn the necessary skills from counselors. Teaching behavioral self-management principles in the context of women's sex role enculturation is a preventive as well as corrective approach to helping women develop increased personal effectiveness. It is also an important option for those who do not need therapy or who have found other skill training insufficient.

Helping women live up to their potential is a subject of increasing concern among counselors. The women's movement has elicited criticism of the effectiveness of traditional psychological methods in helping contemporary women (Chesler, 1972; Friedan, 1963; Greer, 1971) and simultaneously has brought forth a demand for more relevant strategies (Gardner, 1971; Rice & Rice, 1973). Responses have included a broad range of therapeutic possibilities (Franks & Burtle, 1974; Harmon, Birk, Fitzgerald, & Tanney, 1978), as well as specialized skill building, particularly assertion training (Bower & Bower, 1976; Butler, 1976; Jakubowski, 1973; Wolfe & Fodor, 1978).

Little attention has been given, however, to females who may not have deep-seated problems yet need skills other than assertion simply to redirect

themselves and to increase their overall effectiveness. By helping these women learn the basic competencies of behavioral self-management, counselors can contribute to the prevention of more serious adjustment difficulties. Women in management, homemakers with small children, teachers, nurses, high school and college-age females, women facing the empty nest (Bart, 1971), the retired, the divorced, or widowed—these are representative of the females who can benefit from behavior strategies.

In behavioral self-management the emphasis is on what the woman wishes to do to help herself. Although these skills may be taught on a one-to-one basis, planned group interaction stimulates thinking and often offers women additional options on which to base their decisions. Group interaction is also economically more feasible because the counselor becomes a facilitating change agent for a number of women instead of one.

What is Behavioral Self-Management?

Cognitive and social-learning literature

generally refers to the area of self-change as self-control (Mahoney & Thoresen, 1974; Thoresen & Mahoney, 1974), self-direction (Watson & Tharp, 1977), self-management (Kanfer & Goldstein, 1975; Williams & Long, 1975; Tennov, 1977), or self-instructional training (Meichenbaum, 1977). Behavioral self-management is not to be confused with willpower. In the sense in which the term will be used in this article, behavioral self-management refers to an awareness of and the skills to arrange circumstances that affect an individual's behavior (Mahoney & Thoresen, 1974). Consider this example: A woman habitually makes negative statements about herself: *I'm not attractive to others. I never do the right thing. I'm in a rut.* Exercising self-management in this situation would not simply involve her refraining from making negative statements (willpower) but also involve her programming herself to make positive statements, engaging in activities resulting in positive consequences, and perhaps enlisting significant others in her life to praise, support, and otherwise reinforce her at appropriate times.

Some important components of self-management are

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Self-awareness. The woman learns which aspects of herself she is dissatisfied with and ways in which she wants to be different, for example, wanting more friends and recognizing that she lacks good listening skills.

Environmental awareness. The woman acquires more understanding of how her physical and social environments affect her, for example, how being with different people makes her behave differently.

Competency in applying specific psychological skills. The woman decides which strategies to apply to affect the changes she desires, for example, making contracts with others, rearranging her daily activities, and observing a characteristic in someone else that she wishes to emulate. She finds the skills are generalizable to many situations so that she can even predict difficult periods (empty nest, widowhood, menopause) and implement self-management techniques to lessen her stress.

Advantages of Self-Management

Research in the area of attribution theory and perceived locus of control suggests that, for many women, the sense of personal competency and the sense of control over the external environment are seriously deficient (Feather, 1969; Feather & Simon, 1975; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Women are socialized to rely on others, especially men, rather than on themselves. They are encouraged to conform to the role of helpless woman. Conversely, women who have the skills to recognize their own needs, to direct themselves, and to act effectively on the environment will feel more confident and less buffeted by the winds of fortune. One important advantage for learning these techniques, then, is that women develop alternate behavior patterns resulting in increased self-understanding and in greater competence and control over their own lives.

Second, the use of self-management skills enables women to recognize the environmental context of their problems rather than perceive the problems as unique and caused by them (Gornick & Moran, 1971). Too often women accept total personal responsibility for their problems, concerns, and fears when in fact they are the direct result of the social structure. If a woman sees her helplessness and dependency as caused by some personal failure she may make statements to herself such as, *I'm a nonessential person. I have no skills.*

My children don't need me. I'm only an ornament to my husband. I'm totally dependent on others. But with an awareness of the enculturated aspects of feminine helplessness, the same woman may make an entirely different set of statements to herself: *These feelings of helplessness I have are really very normal. They are feelings shared by other women. I'm not a helpless person but my society has taught me to play a helpless role.*

The third reason is that behavioral self-management stresses a positive rather than a punitive approach. Much aversive behavior already prevails in our society, not the least of which has been the devaluation of women. Women reflect this by belittling and demeaning themselves and their put-downs of themselves become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Although women often display the so-called feminine assets of nurturance and empathy to others, their socialization does not give them permission to apply these same behaviors to themselves. Emphasizing nurturant and empathic responses for themselves as well as others is an integral part of the process of learning positive self-management methods.

Reactions to Consciousness Raising

Consciousness raising comes from many sources: feminist readings, participation in consciousness-raising groups, exposure to news media, conversations with other women, and specific events in a woman's life. These or other factors gradually merge to create a growing awareness that varies from woman to woman and influences her subsequent behavior. Although recognizing the critical role of consciousness raising, we have observed several potential problem responses that frequently follow:

Overreaction. Attempting total change in large areas of her behavior, the woman often loses sight of much that is of value or positive worth in her life. (From now on I'm going to be completely independent and do my own thing.)

Overt, superficial acts. The woman engages primarily in superficial demonstrations of her newfound liberation. (I'll open my own car door, thanks.)

Global rage. (Angry-woman syndrome; Rickles, 1971). Feeling overwhelming anger and frustration at her condition, the woman, without the skills to focus this anger constructively, may not only retain her frustration but seriously risk damaging her relationships

with others as well. (What do you expect from a male chauvinist pig?)

Impotence. Feeling helpless and overwhelmed by her newly acquired awareness, the woman withdraws in despair, paradoxically displaying even more passivity and dependency. (I'll never be able to change. It's too late for me.)

These reactions illustrate that consciousness raising in itself is usually not sufficient. For many women, however, traditional therapy is not necessary nor is assertion training, even broadly conceived, always a cure. Behavioral self-management, with its preventive emphasis, provides additional solutions.

Strategies for Self-Change

Identifying target behaviors. Perhaps more important for a woman than any other tool is learning to convert the general goals identified in the consciousness-raising process into small, precise, target behaviors relevant to her own situation that she can work on immediately. Goals such as increasing self-esteem, autonomy, or a sense of identity need to be translated into specific behavioral evidence or lack of evidence from her everyday behavior. Examining literature and the daily news for ideas about targets, scrutinizing others' actions, monitoring her own behavior, and sharing ideas with other women are all helpful steps toward arriving at precise personal targets. Therefore, a goal of increasing self-esteem may convert to target behaviors such as competence in making out income-tax forms, describing events concisely, or even learning not to keep an immaculately clean house. Note that these targets relate not only to the woman's personal life but to changing roles for the woman in society. Therefore, general consciousness-raising goals expand into a multitude of possible new ways to respond. Identifying these specific responses is a vital step toward self-direction.

Monitoring. As a woman's awareness begins to increase, one of the essential tools she needs is that of monitoring—learning to keep systematic track of her own behavior. For instance, she may monitor to learn more about her current behavior, to identify circumstances surrounding certain events, or to obtain feedback when attempting to increase or decrease her responses. Graphs, logs, diaries, and charts are typical monitoring devices.

For women, monitoring is important

because it gives them a way of functioning as self-scientists and teaches them the uses of analytical, technical tools they can easily understand and apply. Use of technical tools is an area of expertise with which many women, with educational tracking away from science and math, may never have become comfortable.

Monitoring also provides an objective way of validating, disconfirming, or qualifying stereotyped cultural images of women. For example, our society tends to label women as dependent. To monitor such behavior the woman needs to convert dependence into various identifiable actions (e.g., waiting for others to initiate plans and make decisions as opposed to doing so herself). After monitoring her actions, she may discover that she does in fact display a high level of dependent behavior, she is really quite independent, or she is dependent in some contexts (e.g., with her husband, traveling, eating in restaurants) and independent in others (e.g., in her office, with her children, choosing friends). This kind of information helps her become increasingly aware of her own precise actions and may point out specific ways in which she wishes to change or ways in which she may feel more confident about herself.

Finding rewards. Occasionally, women attain a target goal merely by identifying it accurately: Having decided what they want, they simply follow through. But even with high motivation the process of self-change is usually far from simple. Self-arranged reinforcement with effective rewards is needed to encourage it.

Women encounter special difficulties in finding suitable reinforcers for themselves. Because of their orientation to others, many women know much more about what is rewarding to their children or spouses than to themselves. Or they feel guilty when not sharing their rewards. One woman, although concerned about her own lack of free time, wished to reinforce herself by taking her children to the beach on the one morning she could have had without them during the week. Keeping track of pleasurable experiences (including fantasies) and high probability behaviors (Homme & Tosti, 1971) may help women expand their lists of possible reinforcers or substitutes that will not have punishing consequences.

The diversity of rewards is illustrated in these examples taken from women in self-management classes: polishing jewelry, walking barefoot in cool grass,

making a squash casserole, riding a bike, napping, playing the piano, building a stereo from a kit, good conversation, a trip to New York, and (not least) seeing improvement.

Positive covert self-statements may be used effectively in women's reinforcement strategies. As a baseline, negative and positive self-statements may be monitored for a week. Covert comments—such as, *I did that so well! I'm not good enough, I was really honest about that, I did a lousy job*—may be tallied. Because many females suffer from a negative self-image, they often initially produce a high number of negative statements. Learning deliberately to increase honest, specific, positive, and covert self-statements and decrease negative ones is a powerful way to strengthen behavior.

Applying rewards—Use and misuse. Immediately rewarding herself for performing a new or improved target response gives the woman insight into how she can begin to gain more control over her environment and not remain a victim of her socialization. She finds that she possesses the power to change and that change starts with her. Thus, a woman wishing to develop or strengthen such a target behavior as recognizing cues to her own fatigue will want to link any partial or total success about noting fatigue cues to immediate reinforcement, including positive self-statements.

Enlisting others to reward her is especially important to the woman who, because of a poor self-image, may not perceive herself as an effective reinforcing agent. Rewards from certain others may be more effective than her own. Reinforcement from a group may provide an effective transition to self-reinforcement from stereotypic reinforcing figures, such as the woman's boyfriend, husband, or parents.

Stopping unwanted behaviors, such as pouting or sulking (Johnson & Goodchilds, 1976), may be initiated by rewarding incompatible alternatives (e.g., communicating distress through discussion, writing down expressions of hurt or anger instead, or simply gradually reducing the amount of pouting or sulking time).

Our environment reinforces us in many unintentional ways by causing some unwanted behaviors to be inadvertently rewarded and strengthened. For instance, by becoming aware of the possible rewarding effects of attention obtained through self-pity or complaints about her own health, a woman may decide to reduce such methods for

receiving attention and look for others for which she can be rewarded that are not counterproductive.

By unintentionally rewarding others for their actions, a woman may actually be encouraging behavior that is offensive to her. If she does not want to be considered just a sex object, then she should refrain from encouraging men who make remarks about her figure or her dress by acting coy or laughing in a way that reinforces what they say. Many women have been enculturated to cover their real feelings to such an extent that their social behavior, especially with men, becomes a reinforcing reflection of whomever they happen to be with, instead of an honest projection of themselves. A woman may cease to recognize her own feelings or to possess ideas of her own—a real identity loss that fortunately can gradually be reversed by specifying and working on appropriate target behaviors (e.g., keeping a log of ideas from discussions and readings that interest her, joining a weekend workshop by herself, choosing a comfortable male at a party to whom she can relate a recent event or idea from her own life).

Contingency contracting. Contracts state who does what, for how long, under what circumstances, and for what reward. Women may find personal self-contracts useful not only as motivators and verifiers of their self-agreements but also to clarify exactly what is expected:

I, Sally Smith, agree **not** to make any self-deprecatory remarks in my auto-mechanics class for the remainder of the course. These remarks include such statements as "This might sound petty but . . ." or "I know this shows my female ignorance, but please tell me. . . ." I plan to accomplish this by reminders before each class period and being very well prepared with each evening's assignment so that I don't feel so inadequate. My reward, if control is kept, will be to have a professional car wash. (If I do not keep the agreement I will wash my car myself.)
Date_____ (Signed)_____

Contracting may also provide ways in which women's reliance on others may prove to be a short-term asset. In a self-contract a witness's signature is often recommended as further motivation for the person to follow through, and that witness may also serve as a reinforcing agent. In a mutually developed contract the other person is

engaged on an equal basis: One agrees to try to modify a particular behavior provided the other modifies an agreed-on behavior as well (Krumboltz & Thoresen, 1976). In close living arrangements such as family life this kind of contract may be especially helpful.

Modeling. Modeling supplies another environmental source for changing behavior. Although the lack of female-role models is often deplored, most women nevertheless possess specific qualities that their peers may find to be excellent sources for target behaviors (e.g., self-starting, conciliating ability, making own judgments). Of course, qualities to model exist in males as well. (Consider the frequently mentioned "masculine" traits of directness, honesty, and decisiveness.) Furthermore, each woman should be aware that she herself serves as a model in some way to others (children, friends, office contacts, husband).

Women may also identify negative models of behavior that they do not wish to emulate by drawing from sources such as stereotypic roles of females in television commercials, soap operas, talk shows, magazines, and books.

Building hierarchies. Epstein (1974) pointed out that women often are not challenged to face their fears and therefore may never lose them. Building hierarchies is a skill that can help women learn to cope with such inadequacies. Our concern is with the everyday fears of living—*anxiousness* rather than *phobic anxiety*—fears such as making math errors when keeping a budget, sharing responsibility, or showing real feelings. By building a hierarchy of gradual exposure to the feared situation while maintaining comfort and relaxation, a woman may overcome many fears.

For instance, one woman student expressed real stress when exposed to all-female groups. She simply could not identify with them. The target she developed was to attend a woman's group that met in her dorm, but the threat she perceived of being associated with other women made her uncomfortable and resistant. She devised the following steps for herself:

1. Engage one participating woman (an acquaintance) in conversation and find out more about the other members.

2. Select another member with whom I may have the most in common and arrange to sit with her at dinner to get acquainted.

3. Select a third member with whom I have less in common and talk with her individually. Find out more about the

4. Attend one meeting with an old friend. (Meetings are open to all.)

5. Attend a meeting alone.

A woman should quite properly remain at each step until ready to cope with the next one. Sometimes steps need substeps or may even be skipped—but at all times the person must feel reasonably comfortable as opposed to "freaking out." Relaxation training is helpful in more serious circumstances. Devaluation of other women is not uncommon among females. In the example just cited, the student's target was really a first step in a hierarchy of relating to women in increasingly diverse situations while always pairing comfort with a gradual extension of her ability to cope. Realistically, she need not like all women, but she can increase her ability to like some and to tolerate others, just as she does with the men in her life.

Conclusion

Women in our time face inevitable dilemmas. How can counselors efficiently and effectively assist women with their uncertainties? By intervening when women first begin to react to a consciousness-raising condition, counselors may steer them away from long-range serious problems. Intervention is enhanced by working preventively with women in groups.

The counselor is a change agent who leads the woman toward increased awareness of her own behavior as well as the influences of her environment, the realization that change begins with her, and the competencies to make self-management possible.

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